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How Can Higher Education Enhance Social Adaptation and Minimize Struggles of International Students?

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ABSTRACT: *As international student mobility grows, persistent adaptation challenges expose a gap between internationalization discourse and institutional practice in Indonesian higher education, highlighting the lack of an evidence-based, context-sensitive framework to effectively support international students. This study introduces the International Student Academic Management (ISAM) model, a framework designed to enhance institutional interventions for international students' social adaptation and to mitigate their adjustment challenges. Employing Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) with a qualitative approach, this study addresses persistent integration issues, particularly among Chinese students in Indonesian higher education institutions. Data were generated from 24 participants, including international students, academic staff, international office administrators, and deans, through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and reflexive fieldwork. The ISAM comprises four interrelated dimensions: Transitional Anchoring, Academic Mediation, Institutional Reflexivity and Adaptation, and Participatory Governance and Strategic Alignment. These dimensions collectively respond to critical gaps in institutional practice and theorization. By positioning international students as*

co-governors and foregrounding institutional learning and multilevel coordination, the ISAM Model offers a transformative, scalable, and context-responsive framework with significant implications for policy, governance, and pedagogical redesign in transnational higher education.

Keywords: Grounded theory, Higher education management, International student management, Student social adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Amid the reconfiguration of global education, internationalization in higher education has shifted from a supplementary endeavor to a core principle shaping the operations of students, institutions, and host nations (Taylor, 2013). Deepening interconnectedness and more permeable borders now drive complex, multi-directional student mobility, turning international study from elite privilege into a mainstream route to social mobility, intercultural fluency, and global career capital, alongside rising tertiary enrollments as students seek transformative experiences and better labor market opportunities (Marginson, 2022; Machado et al., 2024).

International students have effects in host countries that extend well beyond tuition revenue, advancing cultural pluralism, economic diversification, institutional innovation, and soft power driven socio-academic change that stimulates economic activity, academic cosmopolitanism, and domestic intercultural competence (Malveaux & Bista, 2021; Bethel et al., 2020; Marginson, 2024). Institutions and countries of origin alike benefit through diverse student bodies, expanded global networks, collaborative research, intellectual remittances, innovation, and cultural brokerage, even as international students occupy a uniquely precarious yet vital position in global higher education (Zheng et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2021; Montgomery & Trahar, 2023).

However, beneath this narrative of opportunity and intercultural enrichment lies a more complex reality, as international students often face adversities that hinder both academic performance and psychological well-being despite their recognized contributions. They frequently encounter entrenched barriers that restrict integration, undermine emotional health, and diminish academic achievement (Mikal et al., 2021). Research consistently outlines a spectrum of challenges, including language barriers, administrative marginalization, financial precarity, and heightened emotional stress (Moore et al., 2023). As Dhungana et al. (2022) and Ahmad & Nawaz (2022) reported difficulties lead to disparities between domestic and international students that constrain adaptation and reshape well-being and academic paths in deeply personal ways (Hutson, 2026).

The linguistic divide is a persistent source of psychological distress for international students, limiting full academic participation and acting as a gatekeeper of intellectual legitimacy, social belonging, and emotional safety (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Limited proficiency undermines agency, isolates students, and produces cumulative emotional exhaustion, especially when unfamiliar pedagogical norms, interactional styles, and academic standards contrast sharply with prior educational experiences, whereas discrimination and aggressions plus difficulties navigating accommodation, healthcare, and bureaucracy intensify vulnerability and erode a sense of belonging (Cao et al., 2021; Ahmad & Nawaz, 2022; Jofem, 2023).

If unaddressed, these tensions lead to lasting academic repercussions that go far beyond short-term performance. As Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) noted, robust the connection between adaptation challenges and academic discontinuity remains insufficiently theorized. Rather than treating international students as temporary outsiders undergoing cultural initiation, they should be seen as situated agents who navigate identity, emotion, and agency amid enduring structural asymmetries (Godbold et al., 2022). As Wilczewski & Alon (2023) argue, adaptation unfolds as an ongoing effort to reconcile intercultural differences while safeguarding one's cultural roots. The balance between belonging and preservation frequently shapes international students' educational outcomes and emotional well-being (Andrade, 2006).

Contemporary international education scholars have increasingly deployed social adaptation as a lens through which to understand students' transitional experiences. Originating in migration and intercultural psychology, this framework now highlights how international students, as reflexive agents, negotiate and reshape their academic and social environments (Gebru & Yukselkaptanoglu, 2020). This marked a shift away from linear acculturation models in favor of approaches that highlight reciprocal adaptation, hybrid identity formation, and psychological resilience (Saha & Dutta, 2022).

The new paradigm emphasizes that adaptation is not about assimilation but rather involves recalibrating cultural orientations in response to evolving institutional ecologies (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Despite increasingly sophisticated theories, institutional practice remains weak. Universities profess a commitment to internationalization but seldom develop coherent strategies for international students' specific vulnerabilities and trajectories (Jeong et al., 2023).

More often, policy frameworks are fragmented across bureaucratic silos, reactive rather than proactive, and largely disconnected from empirical evidence (Ramachandran, 2021). A persistent gap separates critical scholarship from institutional practice, as universities lack a scalable, evidence-based model for international student management and instead rely on superficial initiatives that leave structural marginalization largely untouched (Abell et al., 2023). The need for a context-responsive management framework is especially acute in Indonesia, an emerging regional education hub that still lacks robust support structures for international students. As inbound numbers from China and other Asian countries increase, this position involves both significant opportunity and risk (Asrori et al., 2025). The country's ambition to become a regional educational leader is undermined by fragmented administration, variable academic standards, and a lack of cohesive policies for managing foreign students (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025). Without integrative frameworks that address academic, social, and emotional needs, the promise of internationalization risks devolving into conflict, alienation, and institutional failure.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a context-sensitive academic management model for international students that reflects the complex, multidimensional nature of their adaptation. Grounded in the lived experiences of transnational learners and institutional actors, the framework moves beyond conventional top-down policy prescriptions (Chandler, 2014). Using an inductive, narrative-driven approach, the study develops a model that is both empirically grounded and institutionally actionable, capturing the complex realities of adaptation and guiding reform (Yengkopiong, 2023). To achieve this goal, the research uses the Straussian variant of grounded theory, a qualitative methodology involving systematic coding, iterative comparison, and theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This method is particularly well suited to complex phenomena marked by ambiguity and limited prior theorization characteristics inherent to the adaptive experiences of international students in Indonesia (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). Grounded theory forgoes fixed hypotheses, instead developing explanations inductively through iterative interviews with Chinese students, academic staff, and policy administrators to uncover the organizational logics and affective dynamics of transnational adaptation.

Crucially, this methodological approach also foregrounds an epistemological stance that centers participant narratives and values inductive theorizing over Eurocentric or universalizing paradigms (Elhami, 2024). This study develops a contextually grounded, institutionally responsive model that rejects imported templates in favor of frameworks attuned to local realities. It addresses policy gaps in international student management and advances decolonizing educational theory by positioning international students as dialogic constructors of institutional change (Mwangi, 2023). In light of the above, the present study is guided by a core set of interrelated research questions:

1. What are the institutional management interventions to support social adaptation and minimize the struggles of international Chinese students within HE institutions?

2. How do institutional actors and governance structures mediate interactions among multiple stakeholders to achieve a comprehensive model of international student academic management?
3. How does the theoretical model structure a responsive and scalable international student academic management framework?

This research moves beyond description to propose a theoretically rigorous, contextually attuned, and pragmatically actionable framework for international student academic governance, conceived as a strategic compass for institutions seeking to turn internationalization from rhetoric into inclusive and enduring practice. Grounded in empirical realities and shaped by the voices of those most affected, the model aspires to bridge the gap between global discourse and local institutional transformation (Hosseini & Barry, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Global Landscape of International Student Mobility

Internationalization has shifted from a peripheral concern to a core structural imperative in higher education strategies (Altbach & Reisberg, 2022). The proliferation of overseas campuses and joint degrees signals a new educational political economy in which mobility underpins institutional and student advantage (Brooks & Waters, 2025). This study interrogates the determinants of transnational student management models amid increasing student mobility and emerging global education hubs (Varghese, 2021), raising issues around quality assurance, student rights, and credential recognition, especially in countries with weak governance (Asamoah et al., 2025). In 2021, more than 6.4 million students were internationally mobile, with Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, growing as both a sender and host (OECD, 2023). Varied motivations and ongoing issues of commodification, alienation, and mental health highlight the need for comprehensive reforms, as Indonesia positions itself as a regional education hub (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

Theoretical Perspective on Social and Academic Adaptation

International students, especially those from China, must adapt across academic, emotional, and cultural domains to thrive in foreign higher education, prioritizing the navigation of new environments over mere assimilation. For educational sojourners, success lies in discerning how best to operate within unfamiliar systems rather than seeking existential acceptance (Berry, 2005). Upon entering unfamiliar academic and sociocultural systems, Chinese international students must meet institutional demands such as lectures, assignments, exams, and thesis work while also balancing these scholarly obligations with their personal lives. This dual pressure makes negotiating study life equilibrium a central task in their adaptation (Omeluzor et al., 2022). This balancing act is often strained by language barriers, limited support systems, academic disorientation,

and heightened psychological vulnerability. If unaddressed, these difficulties can erode international students' academic performance and emotional stability (Bista, 2016) while also undermining institutional sustainability and social harmony in host nations (Chow, 2004). Effective adaptation is crucial to international students' cognitive, psychological, and intercultural development. However, despite rising scholarly interest, research on the academic adjustment of Chinese international students in foreign higher education remains relatively sparse (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021).

Institutional Approaches to International Student Management

There is an urgent need for a robust, context-sensitive framework for international student management, as students still struggle with adaptation in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape marked by growing mobility and cross-border campuses (Xue & Singh, 2025; Yerken et al., 2022; Zeleza, 2022). This intensification of internationalization compels universities to pursue global student recruitment as a strategy for financial gain, improved global ranking, and strengthened diplomatic ties (Marginson, 2024).

The economic motives fueling this expansion, especially in the Anglophone and Asia-Pacific contexts, often surpass institutional capacity to support international students beyond recruitment, resulting in significant gaps in integration, inclusive pedagogy, and psychological well-being (Altbach & Reisberg, 2022). Consequently, many students face ongoing barriers such as acculturative stress and academic alienation, which impede their integration and success (Noyori & David, 2021). Existing models frequently treat international students as mere economic resources or cultural guests, overlooking their potential as active contributors to institutional life (McLaren et al., 2015). Thus, a paradigm shift toward transformational management is urgently needed to position international students as core stakeholders in the global academic community.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research, nonwestern higher education still lacks a coherent, empirically grounded management model for international students because studies on mobility, governance, and student adaptation remain fragmented and are rarely integrated (Yu & Guo, 2023). Existing studies document international students' challenges but seldom theorize how psychosocial adaptation, institutional responsiveness, and governance intersect, a gap that is especially evident in Indonesia, where Chinese international students grow outpaces strategic management development (Page & Chahboun, 2019). Institutional responses thus remain piecemeal, relying on superficial programs and untested assumptions, while theoretical models neglect how emotional, cognitive, and behavioral adaptation interact with institutional structures (Volet & Jones, 2012; Bakirci et al., 2025).

This study contends that this gap is best bridged through a grounded theory inquiry into the lived experiences of Chinese students and institutional actors in

Indonesia (Goh, 2011). Drawing on Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) to construct relational and systemic categories aligned with institutional realities, it produces a contextually grounded, theoretically generative model that can be scaled to similar environments (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Maringe et al., 2023).

Justification for Model Development

This study develops a comprehensive, context-sensitive management model for Chinese international students in Indonesian higher education, addressing the limitations of fragmented and reactive existing frameworks (Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025). A grounded model is vital not only for explaining but also for shaping anticipatory strategies that promote institutional equity and inclusivity. As Maringe et al. (2023) Model-building moves institutions from reactive responses to structural approaches by turning psychosocial, cultural, and agentic factors into actionable frameworks (Marginson, 2024).

Without such grounding, interventions often fail to connect with their intended mechanisms (Nielsen & Abildgaard, 2013). As the number of Chinese enrollments grows and policies shift in Southeast Asia, institutions face widening gaps between student needs and existing systems (Kholifah et al., 2024). Through SGT and lived narratives, this model will be contextually embedded, empirically saturated, and socially informed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Li & Amatyakul, 2025), bridging macrolevel governance and microrelational dynamics (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2019) to support institutional reform and transformation (Yu & Guo, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study uses the Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) within a constructivist-interpretivist view of reality as “socially constructed” and known through lived experience (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; K. Charmaz, 2006). Using systematic coding, theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and memo writing, grounded theory develops context-specific explanations of international student adaptation in non-Western settings and a participant-centered, decolonizing model of international student management in Indonesia (Mills, 2022; Demirbilek et al., 2022; Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025).

Population

The study involves students, lecturers, coordinators, support units, and academic leaders in managing Chinese international students in Indonesia (Marginson, 2023). Chinese students are the primary focus given their distinct sociocultural position and growing presence in Asian higher education, while academic staff and administrators shape policy, pedagogy, and institutional responsiveness; in SGT, this multi-level involvement strengthens triangulation

and links lived experience to Indonesia's management practices (Yulong et al., 2023; de Wit, 2023; Gebregergis & Csukonyi, 2025).

Sampling and Participants

This study uses SGT theoretical sampling, iteratively adding cases as the analysis unfolds rather than fixing the sample in advance (K. Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Initial Chinese international students, administrators, and academic staff were supplemented by other institutional stakeholders to refine the categories of adaptation barriers, institutional responsiveness, and psychosocial resilience and to strengthen theoretical validity, with sampling in an interpretivist constructivist frame continuing until saturation (Mills, 2022; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Saturation

This study sets the sample size by theoretical saturation, which is reached when interviews no longer add new insights, typically within 20–30 cases (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Mills, 2022; Guest et al., 2011). Beginning with 12 Chinese students, theoretical sampling added key staff and other institutional stakeholders to refine categories and achieve perspectival triangulation, with interviews stopping once coherent axial and selective categories emerged, making the sample defensible on methodological and epistemological grounds (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection procedures

This study used a multi-modal qualitative design centered on RQ-driven semi-structured interviews that balanced structure and flexibility, supported by an academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation guide piloted with two students (Maxwell, 2021; Allen & Wiles, 2016). Trustworthiness was strengthened by triangulating documents, observations, and digital artifacts, alongside reflexive journaling over six months of ethically approved fieldwork (Bowen, 2008; Angrosino, 2007; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Data Analysis and Coding Scheme Techniques

The analysis used SGT three-tier coding open, axial, and selective under constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Open coding produced meaning units and NVivo codes, axial coding grouped them into categories and subcategories, and selective coding unified them in a memo and map supported core theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Mills, 2022). Constant comparison, NVivo-assisted coding, and analytic memos yielded a saturated grounded theory of international student management in non-Western higher education (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

This study followed international ethical standards for qualitative grounded theory, including informed consent that clearly outlined purpose, rights, and data use (Wiles, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through pseudonymized, encrypted data and secure, time-limited storage under a low-risk, institutional review board-approved protocol with appropriate safeguards (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2020).

RESULTS

Open Coding Results

Open coding theorized international student management from dual perspectives (students as recipients, staff as architects of integration), distilling 29 interviews' 842 units into 86/34 codes, which were triangulated via line-by-line analysis, memos, documents, observations, and artifact field notes, and early-semester disorientation from unclear prearrival information, airport confusion, and weak integration support, coded across information, orientation, housing, navigation, and visa support. Please look at Figure 1.

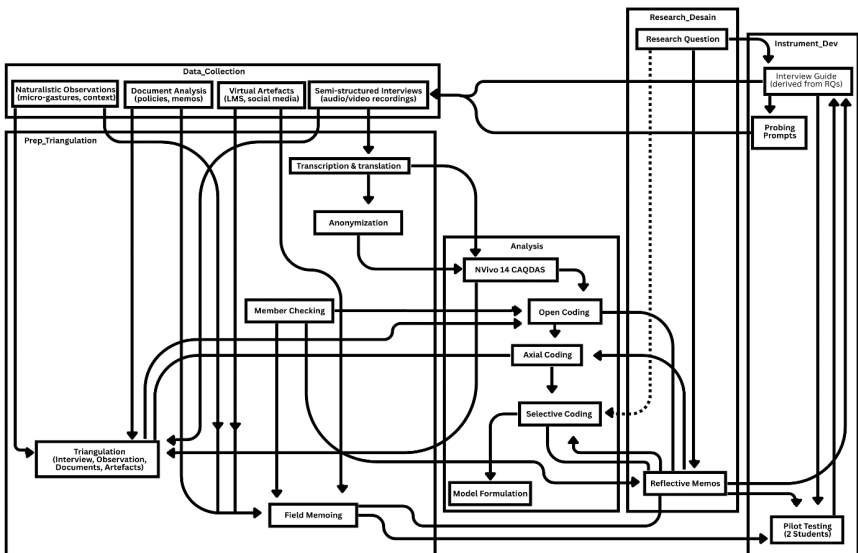


Figure 1: Diagram of Data Flow

Academic struggles were coded around assignment and rubric clarity and tutorial guidance, with faculty conceding limited translation and visual aid. Pervasive

language barriers in key processes produced codes on bilingual services, translator access, and simplified documents, supported by observations. Superficial cultural inclusion generated codes on deeper immersion, intercultural dialog, and religion-sensitive accommodations.

Psychosocial concerns such as isolation, anxiety, and weak institutional response generated codes on counseling, crisis support, anti-discrimination handling, and peer-based programs. Administrative rigidity and fragmented communication produced codes on policy feedback, case-based handling, multichannel responsiveness, tech access, and immigration support. Feedback culture and bureaucratic fragmentation yielded codes on feedback channels and cross-unit coordination. Governance data and student advocacy produced codes on international student policy, performance and accreditation planning, and student-led design and evaluation, indicating a shift toward participatory governance.

Results of Further Coding

Axial coding reassembled open codes by mapping conditions, contexts, actions/interactions, and consequences for each category (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Constant comparison produced five principal dimensions of the institutional logic of international student academic management, each with empirical indicators linked to institutional outcomes in a layered, recursive model. Axial and selective coding inductively generated these categories and dimensions from patterned meanings across interviews, observations, documents, and digital artifacts, with cross-data convergence and variation ensuring theoretical coherence and empirical grounding.

Triangulated axial and selective codes across Chinese students, staff, and administrators yielded three categories: onboarding infrastructure, language mediation, and sociocultural anchoring. These groups have prearrival clarity/orientation/visa, capture language as an institutional gatekeeper to legal/academic/psychological support, and synthesize culture shock/conditional belonging with staff to help individuals avoid it.

Academic scaffolding: Coursework/grading uncertainty highlights the need for contextual academic literacy amid limited translations.

Psychosocial resilience support includes well-being tied to persistence, clustering counseling, stress support, and peer outreach.

Mentorship & peer bridging: informal learning and safe help seeking via buddy programs often surpass formal channels.

Administrative reflexivity: institutional learning via revised SOPs and feedback loops.

Digital & legal facilitation: online access and compliance issues.

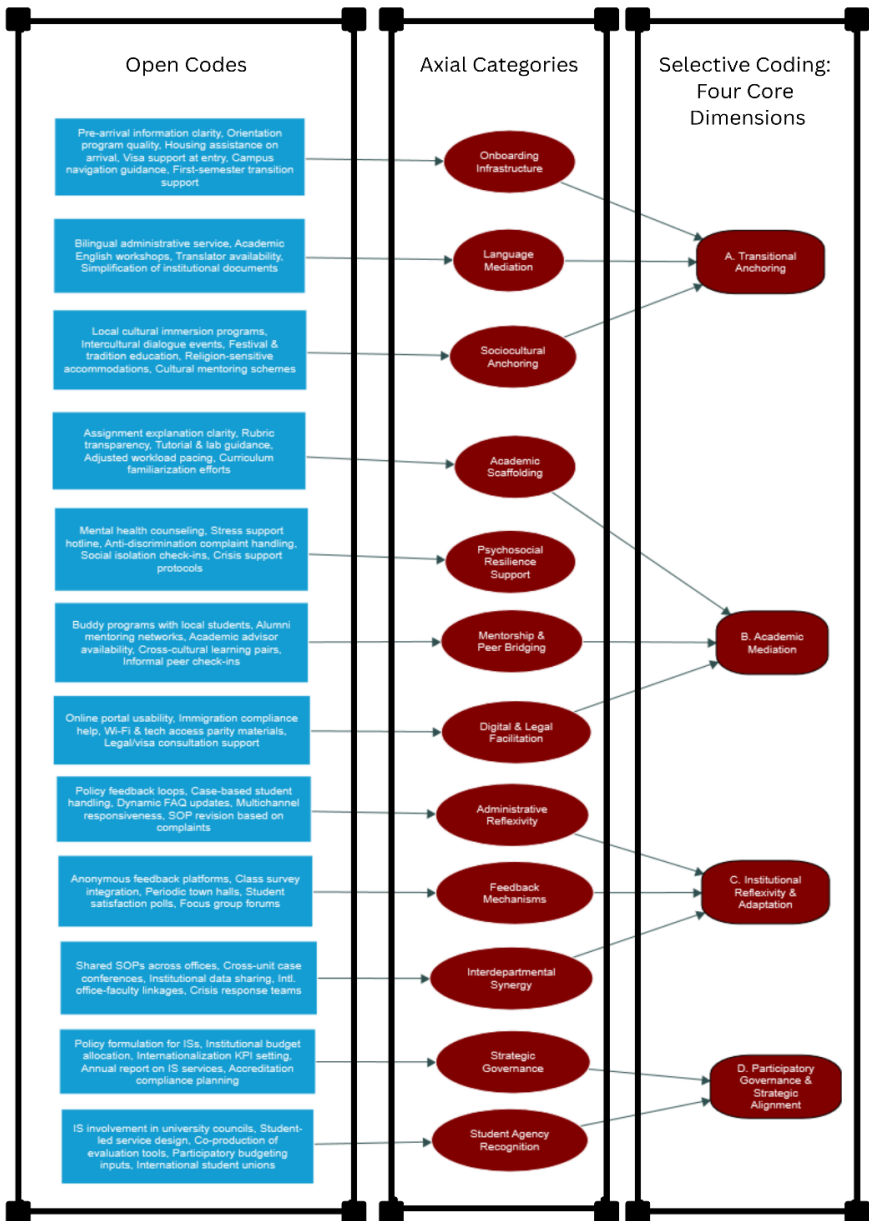


Figure 2: Further Coding Process

Selective coding condensed these into four core dimensions: (1) Transitional Anchoring (onboarding, language, sociocultural integration), (2) Academic Mediation (scaffolding, mentorship), (3) Institutional Reflexivity & Adaptation (feedback loops, digital systems), and (4) Participatory Governance & Strategic Alignment (student roles in policy and co creation). Together, they constitute the International Student Academic Management (ISAM) Model, a multidimensional, relational, and cocreative framework for international student management in higher education. Please look at Figure 3.

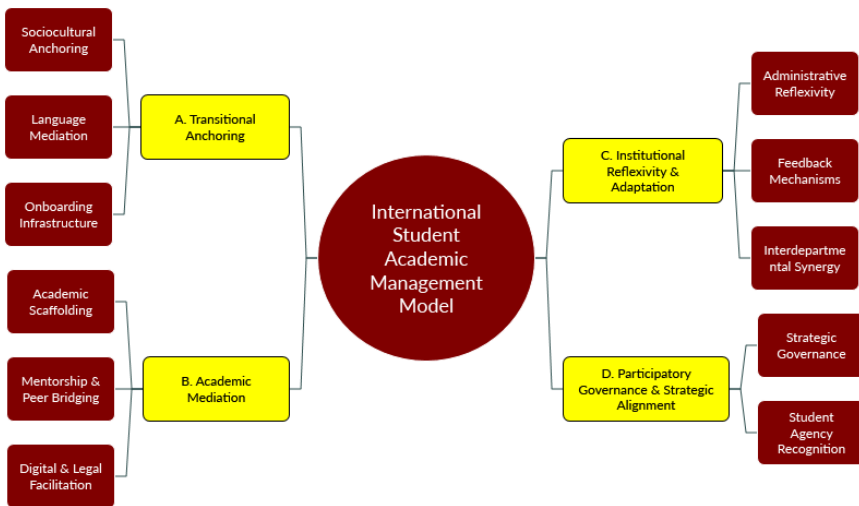


Figure 3: ISAM Model Visualization

The model addresses structural, psychosocial, academic, and political conditions that shape international student success and inclusion. Its dimensions and indicators are as follows:

- a) The first dimension, transitional anchoring, is foundational, as international students enter unfamiliar academic and sociocultural ecosystems, risking dissonance or withdrawal. It integrates onboarding infrastructure, language mediation, and sociocultural anchoring, which together provide logistical support, remove bureaucratic–linguistic barriers, and build belonging and psychosocial safety as a platform for academic engagement.
- b) The second dimension, academic mediation, provides the pedagogical infrastructure for international students to navigate unfamiliar systems. It comprises academic scaffolding, mentorship & peer bridging, and digital & legal facilitation, framing success as coproduced through formal and informal networks that clarify expectations, share tacit academic capital, and promote equity.
- c) The third dimension, institutional reflexivity and adaptation, captures the institution’s capacity to function as a learning organization through

administrative reflexivity, feedback mechanisms, and interdepartmental synergy, ensuring continuous practice revision and coordinated responses to student issues.

- d) The final dimension, participatory governance and strategic alignment, positions international students as cogovernors by integrating strategic governance and student agency recognition. Strategic governance embeds their needs regarding resources, KPIs, and accreditation, while student agency recognition brings them into co-design, budgeting, and evaluation, fusing top-down planning with bottom-up legitimacy and avoiding technocratic or merely performative participation.

Taken together, the ISAM model is an integrated, empirically grounded framework for the complex realities of international students in higher education, linking transitional anchoring, academic mediation, institutional reflexivity, and participatory governance. It treats international students as whole persons within whole institutions, making equity an organizational design principle and offering a data-grounded, student-driven, context-adaptable blueprint for institutional redesign.

DISCUSSION

Institutional Management Intervention to Endorse Social Adaptation and Minimize the Struggles of International Students in Higher Education in the Host Country

The findings show that cohesive, multidimensional institutional interventions decisively shape Chinese international students' social and academic adaptation. The four ISAM dimensions position adaptation as an institutional responsibility and highlight structured onboarding as a strategic, not merely logistical, priority. Building on Sawir et al. (2008), Marginson (2014), and Su et al. (2020), the model integrates language mediation and sociocultural anchoring into a single transition framework, with students describing language assistance as “the first bridge” and belonging as institutionally constructed. Unlike Tinto's (1997) persistence model, it introduces “equilibrium scaffolding,” prioritizing stabilization before cognitive engagement.

Academic mediation addresses intellectual marginalization by scaffolding unfamiliar pedagogy, mobilizing peer mentors as “translators of university culture” (Yamazaki et al. (2022) and easing digital–legal barriers that make “even logging into class systems a daily struggle.” These practices refer to academic support as epistemic democratization rather than remediation.

Institutional reflexivity & adaptation captures meta-level responsiveness via administrative reflexivity, feedback mechanisms, and interdepartmental synergy that adapt learning–organization principles to international education. Extending the work of Robson et al. (2020), the model treats feedback as epistemic data and synergy as a remedy for governance fragmentation.

Finally, participatory governance and strategic alignment challenge tokenistic internationalization by embedding student agency recognition and strategic governance, for example, through board representation and codesigned intercultural programs. It responded to students who felt like “clients, not members of the academic community,” advancing cogovernance as a normative expectation. Going beyond descriptive work (Cho, 2021), it positions cogovernance as a corrective to hierarchy and reinterprets Bourdieu’s institutional capital through a redistributive lens.

Institutional Actors and Governance Structures to Mediate Multiple Stakeholders in Realizing a Comprehensive Collaboration for Internal Student Academic Management

The imperative to develop institutional actors and governance structures for international student academic management is administrative, epistemological, and political. From saturated critiques of misalignment and exclusion, the model treats participatory governance and strategic alignment via strategic governance and student agency recognition as constitutive of sustainable internationalization. A policymaker noted that international student services remain peripheral rather than central to planning, echoing Vavrus & Pekol (2018) warning that without structural mainstreaming, internationalization remains performative.

Unlike Tinto’s (1997) integration models that center student behavior, this model redirects responsibility to governance architecture, prioritizing coherence, responsiveness, and dialog. Strategic governance embeds student diversity into budgeting, compliance, academic planning, and staff training (Bamberger & Kim, 2023). Student agency recognition shifts practice from consultation to dialogic cogovernance through codesign, participatory budgeting, and shared success metrics, countering recurring disempowerment and Marginson’s (2024) “institutional silence” around international student citizenship.

Operationalizing student agency is both ethical and strategic: excluding students from planning risks culturally illiterate programs and alienation, whereas participatory design boards correlate with higher uptake and satisfaction, reflecting the democratization of governance described by Ayala-Orozco et al. (2018). Strategic governance provides structure, student agency confers legitimacy, and their interdependence underpins “governance hybridity,” where formal authority is reinforced by informal legitimacy networks.

Compared with lifecycle or competence frameworks that map phases but underplay power asymmetries, this model embeds international student management in the university’s “strategic nervous system,” making it reflexive, distributed, and resilient while avoiding elite capture (Patrick, 2022). Its radical move is to invert hierarchy, empowering Chinese and other international students to “serve back” into institutional logics and advancing reparative justice against their historic treatment as transactional assets rather than partners.

International Student Academic Management Model Formulated with SGT Research Design to Provide a Responsive and Scalable Action for the International Student Management Issue

The International Student Academic Management (ISAM) Model, developed through SGT, offers both a methodological contribution and a strategic response to conceptual and operational gaps in international student engagement. Inductively derived from lived realities and institutional tensions, it proposes a multidimensional, context-responsive, stakeholder-inclusive, and scalable framework that surfaces systemic failures while charting pathways for reconfiguration.

The four dimensions - transitional anchoring, academic mediation, institutional reflexivity & adaptation, and participatory governance & strategic alignment - emerged from empirical saturation via constant comparison, open/axial coding, and memoing (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). They follow a recursive logic from access to pedagogical integration, structural agility, and inclusive governance, forming a governance ecology responsive to student needs and institutional mandates.

Unlike earlier frameworks, the ISAM model is an institution-centric, rejecting the deficit views of students in favor of institutional transformation. While the OECD (2022) emphasizes infrastructure and digital tools but underspecifies political and relational architecture, the ISAM's participatory governance makes student agency structural and transitional anchoring address early challenges as issues of infrastructural justice and institutional responsibility.

Academic mediation advances work on epistemic adjustment (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021) by treating scaffolding, peer bridging, and digital or legal facilitation as institutional duties that redistribute epistemic resources and promote cognitive equity rather than remediation. Institutional reflexivity and adaptation add a meta-lens of agility, extending frameworks that overlook institutional evolution (Maringe et al., 2023) by embedding “reflexive internationalization” in enduring structures rather than ad hoc initiatives.

The fourth dimension, participatory governance and strategic alignment, is the ISAM's most radical move, which redefines governance as a dialogic contract between institutions and international students. Departing the majority of higher education management models found by Resch (2023), where student voices are often ignored in planning, ISAM integrates them through cogovernance tools (participatory budgeting, shared metrics, collaborative strategic planning), and its modular design supports localization in various contexts - for example, ASEAN HEIs vs Western, answering the call of Marginson (2023) for models “globally conscious but locally actionable.”

The ISAM offers an architectural response to structural failure, providing a scalable logic for institutional diagnosis, intervention, and coevolution with international student communities while operationalizing social justice through design. Empirically derived and aligned with contemporary critique, it recenters institutional agency as the key variable and reframes international education as a site of systemic transformation for both students and host institutions.

CONCLUSION

The International Student Academic Management (ISAM) Model, developed through a rigorous Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) design, offers a robust, original, and empirically grounded framework that addresses systemic deficiencies in international student services by integrating data from diverse institutional actors and Chinese international students. Its four dimensions - transitional anchoring, academic mediation, institutional reflexivity & adaptation, and participatory governance & strategic alignment - target structural and epistemic gaps in current internationalization, recasting students as coarchitects of their academic ecosystems and institutions as adaptive learning entities. In challenging siloed approaches, the model advances cross-sectional governance, culturally responsive onboarding, pedagogical reconfiguration, and shared agency in strategic planning, providing a scalable blueprint for both policy reform and campus practice to shift from symbolic inclusion to operational transformation. As such, ISAM represents both a theoretical advancement and a practical intervention for inclusive, sustainable international student governance.

Data availability statement: For those interested in accessing our data, including the completed semistructured interview responses from higher education students and instructors, please contact the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of interest: We have no conflicts of interest.

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